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Disposition development in drama: the role of moral, immoral and ambiguously moral characters

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Abstract: Understanding what drives narrative appeal is a major focus of entertainment research. Disposition theory proposes that appeal is a function of the dispositions viewers hold towards characters, which are in turn driven by viewer perceptions of character morality and outcomes experienced by characters. However, the manner in which dispositions change overtime has not been extensively researched. In addition, disposition research has overlooked characters that do not provoke consistently strong dispositions in viewers. The current study tracks disposition formation across eight weeks of a serial drama. Results indicate that as predicted, character morality and liking are strongly related, and that depending on the morality of the character, these dispositions can shift overtime in a predictable fashion. Characters who do not engender strong dispositions in viewers do play a role in overall enjoyment, however may be less critical in dispositional processes than clear-cut heroes and villains. Therefore, to understand the role these characters play we may need to look beyond dispositional concerns.

Keywords: disposition; moral; character; drama, narrative; entertainment.

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1 Introduction

Explaining what drives the perception and appeal of characters is a major goal of media research (Hoffner and Cantor, 1991; Zillmann, 2000). Disposition theory (Zillmann, 2000) proposes that character evaluations in drama are largely based on the extent to which characters uphold or violate moral standards of the audience. The more characters uphold or violate audience morality, the more these characters engender emotional reactions (such as empathy) in viewers. Empathic reactions to characters translate into great joy at positive outcomes, and sorrow at negative outcomes. The resultant emotional experience is in direct proportion to the empathy felt towards characters. It stands to reason that authors would generally create strongly moral or immoral characters in hopes of generating strong empathic reactions to these characters, and thus maximise resultant affect at the culmination of a narrative. Perhaps as a result of this, most disposition theory-based research has focused on these strongly defined characters in narrative (Raney, 2004). Recently, however, there has been a surge of interest in characters with less clearly defined morality due to their prevalence in popular media (Krakowiak, 2008; Krakowiak and Oliver, 2009).

The role that morally ambiguous characters play is not well studied. Previous studies have examined perceptions of morally ambiguous characters in short stories which experimentally varied character behaviour (Krakowiak, 2008). However, characters with ambiguous morality are thought to shift from moral to immoral behaviour during the course of a programme. Therefore, it may be more relevant to examine change in perceived morality and its resultant effect on disposition formation and enjoyment over the entire course of exposure to character actions (e.g. within or across a series of episodes with a complete narrative arc). For example, in a longitudinal study taking place over eight weeks of exposure to a narrative soap opera, Tamborini et al. (in press) found that the perceptions viewers held regarding characters' morality shifted overtime. The morality of ambiguous characters changed in a particularly complex fashion. In their study, however, the extent to which these characters affected programme enjoyment was not examined. Additionally, Tamborini et al. (in press) exposed participants to a serial drama without a clear finale. Thus, the impact of ambiguous characters in dispositional processes remains unclear. The current study was developed to examine the extent to which perceptions of character morality shift over the course of a naturally occurring

narrative stimulus with a conclusive finale. Situated within a framework based on disposition theory, this study extends both our knowledge of characters and the way in which enjoyment can be affected by character development in drama.

2 Literature review

Disposition theories explain entertainment's appeal as a function of attitudes towards story characters and the outcomes that befall them (Zillmann, 2000). Although there are many disposition-based theories (Raney, 2004), all generally argue that audiences will enjoy watching good things happen to good characters, and bad things happen to bad characters. The disposition theory of drama, in particular, argues that it is the viewer's moral judgement of characters that allows audiences to sanction the potentially negative outcomes that befall them (Zillmann, 2000). In simple terms, viewers (even those who are not generally vindictive) are allowed to wish for terrible things to happen to characters in proportion to the immorality of the character. Similarly, viewers wish for good things to happen to moral characters to the extent that moral characters deserve. In the end, emotional response to character outcomes wherein audiences see their dispositionally moderated hopes and fears realised successfully (in just endings) results in great joy. Conversely, hopes and fears realised unsuccessfully (in unjust endings), results in great disappointment.

How exactly are dispositions towards characters developed? Zillmann (2000) argues that media consumers are 'untiring moral monitors' constantly evaluating the actions of characters and responding based on those appraisals. Accordingly, affect towards characters will vary (from strong like to strong dislike) to the extent that we continually judge actions as morally appropriate or inappropriate (Raney, 2004). The logic behind disposition theory implies that creating strong dispositions towards characters is essential to the experience of enjoyment. The strength of emotional response to these outcomes can be expected to result from both the valence and strength of dispositional considerations. Clearly defined dispositions should produce powerful experiences of joy or sorrow when hoped or feared for outcomes are observed. Weak dispositions are unlikely to produce strong emotional reactions (of any kind) when hoped or feared outcomes are observed for these characters. Therefore, understanding disposition formation is the key to understand dramatic enjoyment.

Although disposition theory research has focused primarily on how attitudes towards characters develop in the short term (Raney, 2004; Zillmann and Bryant, 1975; Zillmann and Cantor, 1977), the development of dispositions towards characters is especially critical when considering serial dramas. Serial dramas are sequential narratives that reveal a bit of the story each week, thus building suspense and character involvement with each instalment. Tamborini et al. (in press) recently examined the development of dispositions over the course of eight weeks of exposure to a popular soap opera. They found that dispositions towards characters polarised with increased exposure to the characters. That is, characters perceived as moral after one week of exposure were perceived to be more virtuous with greater show exposure, and characters initially perceived as immoral were perceived to be less virtuous with greater exposure. This is consistent with previous research in attitude polarisation, which suggests that preliminary dispositions will tend to intensify overtime rather than shift dramatically (Lord et al., 1979). It is also consistent with arguments by Raney (2004), who reasons that initial

dispositions towards characters shape subsequent interpretations of character actions, thus intensifying initial dispositions towards characters.

Tamborini et al. (in press) also identified a group of ‘ambiguous’ characters who were not only perceived to be less virtuous with greater exposure to the story, but also judged to be as moral (upon initial perception) as the good characters. It is important to note that these characters did appear truly ambiguous, rather than simply neutral. That is, they did not simply remain in the centre of the morality scale, but shifted from good to bad based on the amount of back story provided. Due to the experimental design of Tamborini et al. (in press) which involved varying exposure to back story before viewers judged character morality or virtue after a final viewing week, it is difficult to tell why these characters demonstrated this pattern of ambiguity. It is possible that these characters were in fact clearly defined in storylines that were not featured during the eight weeks used as stimuli, or that were featured in some of the exposure periods and not others. Because Tamborini et al. (in press) did not incorporate a *dénouement* into their stimulus it is difficult to know how one might interpret this pattern of moral ambiguity. Finally, as Tamborini et al. (in press) were not primarily concerned with enjoyment as an outcome variable, the extent to which these ambiguous characters contribute to enjoyment is still unclear.

Therefore, a closer look is required into what makes these characters different from good or bad characters, and their role in promoting viewer enjoyment. If these characters are not providing emotional access to a strong emotional resolution, as suggested by disposition theory logic, then what purpose do they serve? Are they somehow related to the dispositions formed towards other characters? How do their outcomes affect the overall emotional resolution experienced from the dramatic presentation? What is required to determine if a character is truly ambiguous?

As previously stated, we might expect that it is relatively easy for authors and screenwriters to create clearly defined good and bad characters using well established character stereotypes and clear-cut outcomes (Raney, 2004). Indeed, although past research has investigated the character behaviours that help to create dispositions (cf., Hoffner and Cantor, 1991) the majority of this research has focused on creating taxonomies of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ behaviours, focusing on clearly defined actions and consequences. For example, Liss et al. (1983) found that children described characters displaying helpful behaviours as the ‘good guys’. Himmelweit et al. (1958) found that adolescents utilised dimensions of behaviour to characterise heroes (polite, helpful and with good gun skills) from villains (gambling, drinking, starting fights and robbing banks) in popular westerns. Similarly, Konijn and Hoorn (2005) demonstrated that positive appraisals on ethics and realism increased viewer appreciation for heroes, whereas negative appraisals on these dimensions increased viewer distance from villains. Recently, Eden et al. (2009) distinguished heroes and villains based on distinct personality features and moral attributes. Whereas research abounds on clearly defined characters, characters with ambiguous morality have not been a central focus of entertainment research. When they have been examined, it is most often in the course of examining the effects of ambiguously moral characters on aggressive behaviour (Liss et al., 1983), or as a ‘neutral’ contrast to more clearly defined good and bad characters (Konijn and Hoorn, 2005).

Recently, however, Krakowiak (2008) and Krakowiak and Oliver (2009) began an investigation into the existence and effects of ambiguous characters on enjoyment and perceived realism in short narrative scenarios. They defined ambiguous characters as those who ‘causes doubt or uncertainty or that can be understood in two or more possible

ways' (Krakowiak and Oliver, 2009). This definition helps to separate truly ambiguous characters from other studies' true neutral characters. Also, their results demonstrated interesting separations between character types. Firstly, they demonstrate that morally ambiguous characters were less liked than good characters, more liked than bad characters and perceived to be more realistic than either clearly defined character types (Krakowiak, 2008). Secondly, both ambiguous and clear characters were equally enjoyed.

With regard to Tamborini et al. (in press), the shifts in ambiguous character morality suggest that morality of ambiguous characters is more mutable than that of good or bad characters. Good and bad characters followed a pronounced linear trend towards extremes with more exposure time. However, both the morality of clear-cut characters and that of ambiguous characters were significantly related to perceived justness of outcomes. This demonstrates that morally ambiguous characters may play a significant role in the determination of emotional response to drama. Despite this, research on the role outcomes play in emotional response has been overlooked in past research. Prior research on ambiguous characters has ignored the outcome variable in favour of distance (Konijn and Hoorn, 2005) realism or transportation (Krakowiak, 2008). Therefore, an examination of the role outcomes specifically play in enjoyment is required to parse out the effects of ambiguous characters on enjoyment.

The current study was designed to further explore the role of ambiguous characters in dramatic enjoyment, the effect of exposure on perception of character morality and the relationship of morally ambiguous characters to clearly defined characters. To examine character development overtime, a serial story with a clear ending was selected, with weekly ratings collected of characters on morality, liking and outcome variables. The following hypotheses were examined. From both Krakowiak (2008) and Tamborini et al. (in press), we hypothesise that there will be distinct groups of characters defined by their morality: those who are perceived as generally moral, perceived as immoral and variously moral or immoral (H1). Based on this basic disposition theory logic provided by Zillmann (2000), we predict that moral perceptions and dispositions will be positively related, such that perceived morality predicts character liking (H2). Replicating Tamborini et al. (in press), we propose that dispositions towards strongly defined characters will polarise overtime (H3). From definitional logic provided by Krakowiak (2008), we predict that ambiguously moral characters will show more moral variance across exposure weeks than either moral or immoral characters (H4). Regarding outcomes for characters, as there is little prior work in this area, we must pose a research question simply exploring the differences in outcomes between good, bad and ambiguous characters (RQ1). And finally, from both Krakowiak (2008) and Weber et al. (2008), we predict that enjoyment will be predicted by character liking, character morality and outcomes for characters, such that enjoyment is strongest when clearly moral/immoral characters experience just outcomes (H5).

3 Method

3.1 Participants

About 46 students (Male = 1, $M_{\text{age}} = 21.17$, $SD = 1.92$, predominantly white) at a large Midwestern university in the US participated for course credit.

3.2 *Stimulus and procedure*

This study was a naturalistic observation conducted during the course of an online serial drama, *Sorority Forever* (McG, 2008). *Sorority Forever* aired from 8 September to 31 October 2008 in 90-sec long webisodes available online each day. The show was chosen due to its obscurity (none of the participants were familiar with the show prior to initial viewing) and its billing as a *suspenseful drama* (Big Fantastic, 2008). Participants watched the show in real time from the initial week's episode to the final airing. Prior to viewing the first episode, participants completed a survey packet including demographic, media use and personality items. During the eight-week duration of the show, participants viewed each of the five episodes from the preceding week in one session. Participants were asked to refrain from watching the show in between viewing sessions, and all participants viewed the show during the same viewing session. After watching the weekly episodes, participants completed a survey packet with items asking them to evaluate their dispositions towards the characters, the morality of the characters' actions, the outcomes for the characters and their general enjoyment of the show. All of the main characters (four male, eight female) were evaluated each week. If the character did not appear in the weekly recap, participants were instructed not to evaluate the character for that week. If characters were not evaluated for two or more weeks by more than 50% of the participants, that character was removed from analysis. This resulted in the removal of seven characters, leaving five characters (one male, four female). After the final week, participants completed a longer survey regarding their general impressions of the show and all characters.

3.3 *Measures*

3.3.1 *Initial survey*

Participant information: in addition to age and gender, participants were asked seven items regarding their general TV viewing behaviour such as frequency of watching TV in general and watching daytime soap operas in particular (e.g. 'On average, how many hours do you spend watching TV during a normal week?'). In addition, participants were asked whether they were current fans of online web series, or were familiar with the production company responsible for *Sorority Forever*. No participants indicated they were currently fans of any online web series, and none had heard of the production company or show prior to this exposure.

3.3.2 *Weekly surveys*

Items were adapted from Weber et al. (2008). All dimensions were measured using a seven-point scale with higher scores indicating greater perceived morality of character behaviour, positive valence of outcomes and character liking. An example item was 'During the week that you watched, would you say that [Character] behaved in a manner that was very moral or very immoral?' anchored at 1 (*very immoral*) and 7 (*very moral*). A photograph of each character was included above all items. At the end of the packet, several items addressed the show itself, including one item regarding the enjoyment of the show 'How much did you enjoy *Sorority Forever* this week?' anchored at 1 (*did not at all enjoy*) and 7 (*enjoyed very much*).

4 Results

4.1 Character types

To test that there will be three distinct groups of characters defined by their morality (H1), overall perceptions of perceived morality for all five retained characters across all eight weeks were examined. First, a repeated measure analysis of variance (ANOVA) with week and character as within-subjects factors was examined for overall moral patterns. Results demonstrated a significant effect of week on morality rating, $F(4, 42) = 256.25$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.85$ (Greenhouse–Geisser correction employed). As expected, one character was perceived as significantly more moral across the weeks than all other characters ($M_{\text{Julie}} = 5.22$, $SE = 0.10$), two characters were perceived as significantly less moral than all other characters, although not significantly different from each other ($M_{\text{Madison}} = 2.49$, $SE = 0.09$; $M_{\text{Bridget}} = 2.51$, $SE = 0.09$) and two characters had varying morality across the weeks, with some weeks these characters being perceived as moral as the good character and some weeks as immoral as the bad characters ($M_{\text{Joaquin}} = 4.51$, $SE = 0.08$; $M_{\text{Taryn}} = 3.80$, $SE = 0.09$).

Based on this inspection of the data, composite variables were created for further analysis. Average character morality across the eight weeks was summed to obtain an overall morality score for each character. As the morality ratings for the immoral and ambiguously moral characters were highly correlated within the relevant characters (Pearson's $r_{\text{Bad}} = 0.68$, $p < 0.01$; Pearson's $r_{\text{Ambiguous}} = 0.45$, $p < 0.05$) the scores for these two sets of characters were averaged within character type within week to form a composite bad and ambiguous character morality rating for all further analyses. The moral character was used alone to form the good character rating for all further analyses.

To examine that these composite moral ratings were significantly different between these three character types a one-way within-subjects ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect of character type on moral rating. There was a significant effect of character type, Wilks' Lambda = 0.09, $F(2, 44) = 230.04$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.91$. *Post hoc* analysis using Tukey's LSD indicated that these differences were significant and in the expected directions such that good characters ($M = 5.21$, $SD = 0.64$) were significantly higher on perceived morality than ambiguous characters ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 0.43$), which were in turn significantly higher in perceived morality than bad characters ($M = 2.50$, $SE = 0.50$).

4.2 Variance in morality

To determine that, as hypothesised, the variance in morality for ambiguous characters overtime is greater than that for good or bad characters, the composite moral ratings of characters overtime were subjected to three repeated-measures trend analyses. Results are presented visually in Figure 1 and descriptive statistics are available in Table 1. In regards to ambiguous characters, there were considerable differences between moral ratings week-by-week, $F(7, 39) = 46.07$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.51$ (Greenhouse–Geisser). A trend analysis indicated that a quadratic trend accounted for a substantial portion of the variance ($\eta^2 = 0.21$, $p < 0.01$). For good characters, results indicate perception of morality varied weekly, $F(7, 39) = 9.51$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.17$ (Greenhouse–Geisser). A trend analysis indicated that the data were well fit by a linear model with the linear component accounting for a significant proportion of the variance ($\eta^2 = 0.27$, $p < 0.01$).

and a quadratic trend also accounting for a lesser but still significant portion of the variance ($\eta^2 = 0.12$, $p < 0.05$). With regard to bad characters, similarly week had a strong effect, Wilks' Lambda = 0.13, $F(7, 39) = 37.76$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.87$. The data were best fit by a quadratic model with the quadratic component accounting for a large proportion of the variance ($\eta^2 = 0.53$, $p < 0.01$) although there was also a significant linear trend ($\eta^2 = 0.32$, $p < 0.01$). Therefore, the good character appeared to become judged as more moral over the course of the show. The bad and ambiguous characters were each affected by events in week 5, wherein the bad characters were judged as more moral than the ambiguous characters, thus accounting for the significant quadratic trends in each case.

As the trend analysis did not suggest that ambiguous characters had more variable morality than bad characters, due mainly to week 5, by subtracting the moral rating for the week with the highest average moral rating for each character type from the moral rating of the week with the lowest, a range of perceived morality was calculated for each character type. Ambiguous characters had the largest average moral range across the weeks ($M_{\text{diff}} = 2.54$; weeks 7–5), although bad characters' moral range was close to that observed for ambiguous characters ($M_{\text{diff}} = 2.29$, weeks 5–7). Good characters had a more restricted range of 1.41. It is worth noting, however, that whereas good characters are judged as uniformly moral across the series, ambiguous characters' morality seems to be a reflection of bad characters' morality. For example, the patterns of moral ratings for ambiguous characters mirror those for bad characters, with the weeks in which bad characters are judged to be moral the same weeks in which ambiguous characters are judged to be less moral and vice versa. The reasons for this are unclear and most likely deal with specifics of plot and narrative specific to this programme, although this is speculative.

Figure 1 Perceived character morality over eight weeks (see online version for colours)

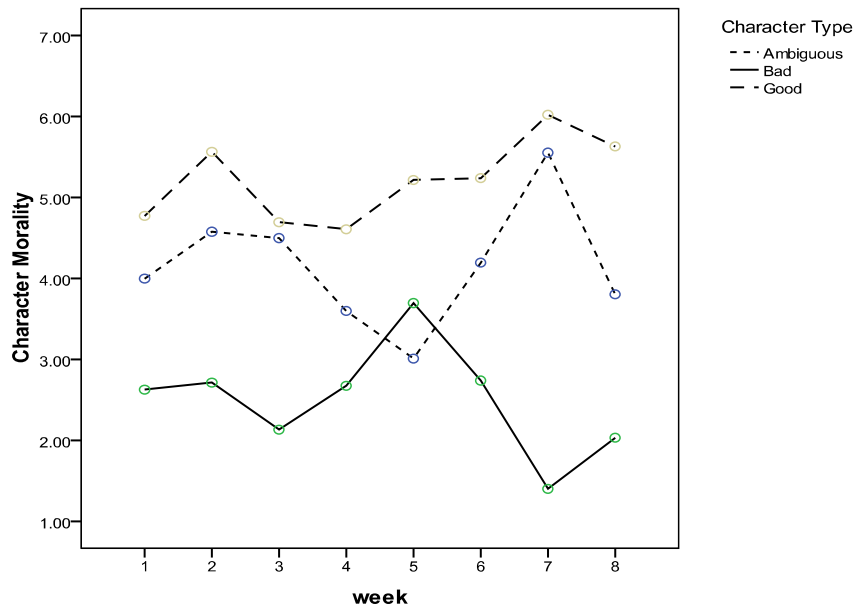


Table 1 Means and SDs for character morality by week

Character type	Morality by week							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Ambiguous	4.00 (0.76)	4.58 (0.90)	4.49 (0.51)	3.59 (0.99)	3.01 (0.77)	4.19 (0.69)	5.55 (0.81)	3.80 (1.04)
Good	4.77 (1.77)	5.56 (1.18)	4.69 (1.26)	4.61 (1.32)	5.21 (0.89)	5.24 (1.01)	6.02 (0.90)	5.63 (1.14)
Bad	2.62 (0.79)	2.71 (0.95)	2.13 (0.82)	2.67 (0.68)	3.69 (0.76)	2.73 (0.86)	1.40 (0.67)	2.03 (1.02)

4.3 Disposition formation

To test our disposition-driven hypothesis that perceived morality is positively related to character liking, overall liking for all characters was examined. Means for character liking showed there was one generally liked character ($M_{\text{Julie}} = 5.47$, $SD = 0.81$); two female characters who were generally disliked ($M_{\text{Madison}} = 2.68$, $SD = 0.85$; $M_{\text{Bridget}} = 2.63$, $SD = 0.84$) and two characters who fell in between the liked and disliked characters ($M_{\text{Joaquin}} = 4.60$, $SD = 0.71$; $M_{\text{Taryn}} = 4.40$, $SD = 0.58$). As the liking ratings for the disliked and ambiguous characters were highly correlated (Pearson's $r_{\text{Disliked}} = 0.56$, $p < 0.01$; Pearson's $r_{\text{Ambiguous}} = 0.50$, $p < 0.01$) they were averaged within character type (as it was done for the moral ratings) to form composite bad and ambiguous character morality ratings for all further analyses. The liked character was used alone to form the good character rating for all further analyses.

Next, bivariate correlations were examined between these composite character variables. As evidenced in Table 2, liking and morality for all characters were significantly positively correlated. Furthermore, bad character morality and liking were separate from good character morality or liking as well as ambiguous character morality or liking. Similar to Tamborini et al. (in press), good character morality was positively correlated with both liking of ambiguous characters and perception of their morality. Liking of good characters was also positively correlated with liking ambiguous characters, but not with ambiguous character morality. Running a series of bivariate regressions, results indicate that morality of ambiguous characters predicts liking of ambiguous characters ($\beta = 0.46$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.21$); morality of good characters predicts liking of good characters ($\beta = 0.44$, $p < 0.01$, $R^2 = 0.20$) and morality of bad characters predicts liking of bad characters ($\beta = 0.56$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.32$).

4.4 Disposition development

To examine both our proposition that dispositions towards strongly defined characters will polarise overtime three repeated-measures ANOVAs (one for each character type) were run with week as the repeated measure and character liking as the dependent variable. Results are presented visually in Figure 2 and descriptive statistics are available in Table 3. For good characters, an ANOVA indicated that perception of liking changed over the course of eight weeks, $F(7, 39) = 4.71$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.09$ (Greenhouse–Geisser correction). A linear trend analysis indicated that, as predicted, these data were well fit by a linear model with the linear component accounting for a significant proportion of the

variance ($\eta^2 = 0.15$, $p < 0.05$). For bad characters, an ANOVA indicated that exposure affected perception of liking of bad characters, Wilks' Lambda = 0.13, $F(7, 39) = 14.48$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.24$ (Greenhouse–Geisser correction). A trend analysis indicated that the data were best fit by a quadratic model with the quadratic component accounting for a large proportion of the variance ($\eta^2 = 0.53$, $p < 0.01$) although there was also a significant linear trend ($\eta^2 = 0.32$, $p < 0.01$), so this hypothesis was somewhat supported for bad characters. In regards to ambiguous characters, an ANOVA indicated that exposure affected perception of liking, Wilks' Lambda = 0.31, $F(7, 39) = 12.70$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.69$. A trend analysis indicated that the data were fit best by a quartic trend accounting for the greatest portion of the variance ($\eta^2 = 0.57$, $p < 0.05$), as well as a linear model with the linear component accounting for a significant proportion of the variance ($\eta^2 = 0.12$, $p < 0.05$).

Table 2 Correlations between character morality and character liking

	<i>Good morality</i>	<i>Ambiguous liking</i>	<i>Ambiguous morality</i>	<i>Bad liking</i>	<i>Bad morality</i>
Good liking	0.44**	0.68**	0.28	−0.07	−0.08
Good morality	—	0.39**	0.51**	−0.22	−0.08
Ambiguous liking	—	—	0.46**	−0.09	−0.09
Ambiguous morality	—	—	—	−0.15	0.07
Bad liking	—	—	—	—	0.56**

**Significant at $p < 0.01$.

Note: $n = 46$.

Figure 2 Perceived character liking over eight weeks (see online version for colours)

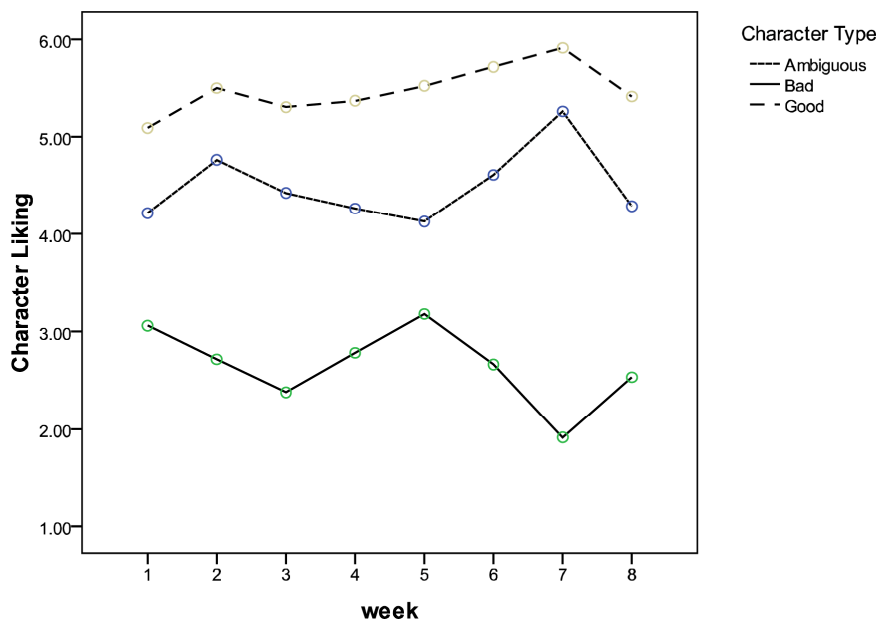


Table 3 Means and SDs for character liking by week

Character type	Liking by week							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Ambiguous	4.21 (0.87)	4.77 (0.88)	4.42 (0.51)	4.26 (0.97)	4.12 (0.89)	4.61 (0.91)	5.26 (0.88)	4.28 (0.81)
Good	5.09 (1.33)	5.50 (1.16)	5.30 (1.05)	5.37 (0.93)	5.52 (1.00)	5.72 (0.91)	5.91 (1.05)	5.41 (1.27)
Bad	3.06 (0.91)	2.72 (0.93)	4.26 (0.97)	2.78 (0.97)	3.18 (0.76)	2.66 (1.10)	1.91 (1.04)	2.53 (1.25)

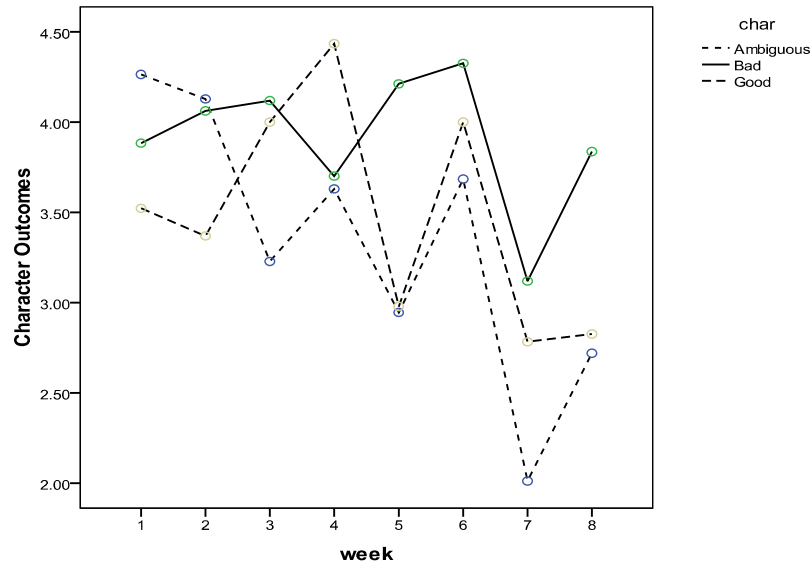
Therefore, as all character types were fit by linear trends, there is some evidence for the hypothesised attitude polarisation, although it is somewhat less clear than anticipated. Ambiguous characters were also fit by a linear trend, although visual inspection of the data suggests that the linear trend is superseded by the quartic trend. Again, events in weeks 5 and 7 were anomalous with the overall trends for both ambiguous and bad characters.

4.5 Character outcomes

To investigate the research question regarding outcomes for good, bad and ambiguous characters, a similar analysis was conducted for both liking and morality. However, as no hypotheses were made regarding trends in characters, only one repeated-measures ANOVA was conducted, with week and character as within-subjects variables and outcome as the dependent variable. Results show a main effect for week, $F(7, 39) = 34.41$, $\eta^2 = 0.43$, $p < 0.01$ (Greenhouse–Geisser); a main effect for character, $F(2, 44) = 22.65$, $\eta^2 = 0.33$, $p < 0.01$ (Greenhouse–Geisser) and an interaction of week by character $F(14, 32) = 13.93$, $\eta^2 = 0.24$, $p < 0.01$ (Greenhouse–Geisser). Visual inspection of the results indicate that in this show bad characters tended to experience better results overall than good or ambiguous characters. Furthermore, ambiguous and good characters experienced wild shifts in fortune from week to week. It also appears that the outcome pattern for ambiguous and good characters was strongly related. Descriptive statistics are available in Table 4 and results are presented visually in Figure 3.

Table 4 Means and SDs for character outcome by week

Character type	Outcome by week							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Ambiguous	4.26 (0.67)	4.12 (0.77)	3.22 (0.47)	3.63 (0.53)	2.94 (0.49)	3.68 (0.84)	2.01 (0.91)	2.71 (1.05)
Bad	3.88 (0.81)	4.06 (0.70)	4.11 (0.85)	3.70 (0.63)	4.21 (0.55)	4.32 (0.79)	3.11 (1.23)	3.82 (1.07)
Good	3.52 (1.04)	3.37 (1.12)	4.00 (1.13)	4.43 (1.06)	2.98 (0.97)	4.00 (1.42)	2.78 (1.43)	2.83 (1.51)

Figure 3 Perceived character outcomes over eight weeks (see online version for colours)

4.6 *Enjoyment*

To examine the prediction that enjoyment will be predicted by character liking, character morality and outcomes for characters, first enjoyment means across all eight weeks were examined (Table 5). Results show that enjoyment grew steadily during the programme, but dropped off sharply after the finale. Next, a series of stepwise regressions were run to examine the extent to which enjoyment was predicted by character liking, morality and outcome for each week (Table 6). Contrary to expectations, the only consistent predictor of enjoyment across all eight weeks was liking for the good character, as well as ambiguous liking in week 1 and outcomes for ambiguous characters in week 5. Thus, H5 was not supported.

The goal of the current study was to shed light on the role of ambiguous characters in narrative drama through exploratory analysis of character development during the course of a programme. Regarding the primary goals of the study, it appears that ambiguous characters are distinct from clearly defined moral and immoral characters in the areas of morality, liking and outcome. In fact, they are distinct because they resemble good or bad characters differently depending on the variable examined. Regarding morality, ambiguous characters reflected bad characters in that they were perceived as moral or immoral inversely to the perceptions of bad characters. Unsurprisingly, given the strong positive correlations between morality and liking, liking for ambiguous characters was also a reflection of the liking for bad characters. The good character, on the other hand, was somewhat removed from this pattern, and did not show systemic fluctuation with either ambiguous or bad characters. This is especially curious given the pattern of outcomes experienced by each character type: good and ambiguous characters appeared to suffer similar (increasingly poor) fates each week, whereas bad characters' outcomes seemed unrelated to those characters.

Table 5 Enjoyment means and SDs across all eight weeks

	<i>Week</i>							
	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>8</i>
Enjoyment	5.37 (2.12)	6.35 (2.04)	6.55 (1.97)	6.25 (1.97)	6.67 (2.31)	6.28 (2.19)	6.93 (2.41)	4.56 (2.66)

Table 6 Stepwise regression results for enjoyment on character liking, morality and outcome

<i>Predictor</i>	<i>Enjoyment by week</i>							
	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>Liking</i>								
Good	0.52 (0.25)**	0.89 (0.22)**	0.76 (0.24)**	0.99 (0.28)**	1.45 (0.25)**	<i>ns</i>	1.34 (0.28)**	0.73 (0.29)*
Ambiguous	1.30 (0.30)**	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
<i>Outcome</i>								
Ambiguous	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	−0.99 (0.46)*	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
Constant	−1.94 (1.47)	1.44 (1.27)	2.50 (1.28)	0.91 (1.55)	2.84 (2.50)	<i>ns</i>	−1.01 (1.69)	0.62 (1.64)
<i>F</i>	12.84**	15.56**	10.27**	12.21**	20.23**	1.38	22.80**	6.12*
Adj. <i>R</i> ²	0.35		0.17	0.24	0.48	–	0.34	0.10

**Significant at $p < 0.01$.

Note: Unstandardised beta weights and standard errors displayed. Only predictors retained in the model are included. Predictors excluded from the model at each week included bad character liking, all morality items and good and bad character outcomes.

Past research suggests that good and bad characters should ideally act as each other's foils, with maximal enjoyment occurring when good characters and bad characters at opposite poles of liking/morality receive equally just outcomes (Zillmann, 1996). However, in this programme the ambiguously moral characters suffered the worst outcomes, and the immoral characters the best. Given this crossed dispositional framework, it is not surprising that the only predictor of enjoyment was liking of the good character. Although this character was not just rewarded for her moral actions, she was also not punished severely. This situation may have invoked what Zillmann termed a 'minimally satisfying' situation. That is, viewers were not happy about the justness at the close of the programme, but least unhappy with her dénouement. It could also be simply that this character was the most important to the plot, and therefore was also most important in driving enjoyment. The story was told from her point of view, and her decisions were key in moving the plot forward. As she spent the most time on screen, viewers bonded with her and perhaps considered their positive emotions for her strong enough to generate enjoyment regardless of her outcomes.

If not to contribute to justified conclusions, why then were these ambiguous characters included? This may have been due to the programme itself, which took the form of an investigation into a secret society. Of the ambiguous characters, one served as

a primary victim for the main villainess, and the other as a ‘red herring’. These both served as important plot devices that helped sustain suspense during the course of the show. As suspense is a function of uncertainty (Zillmann, 1996), including morally ambiguous characters may increase the uncertainty of plot resolutions, and thus heighten the suspense of the narrative. Their presence alone could, therefore, contribute to overall enjoyment of the show through increasing uncertainty, rather than through the dispositional justness of their resolutions. They may also have been included to illustrate the morality of the moral and immoral characters. For example, both ambiguous characters act in morally ambiguous ways under duress from the villains. They are also used as victims that the moral character can altruistically save. The placement of these moral pawns therefore may be a ploy to emphasise the morality of the other characters.

Moving beyond dispositional tenets to other facets of media enjoyment, such as perceived realism and transportation, Krakowiak (2008) suggests that ambiguous characters may be included to increase the realism of narratives. Prior research has also suggested that audiences may have trouble relating to characters that are consistently moral or immoral (Hoorn and Konijn, 2003). The inclusion of some characters that are generally, but not always, moral, may increase the ability of the audience to relate to the characters. Ambiguous characters may help audiences relate to the characters and therefore sustain the illusion of realism, and thus be as integral to the plot as pure heroes and villains.

5 Limitations and future directions

The main limitation to this study is that it was a naturalistic observation designed solely to capture the most basic elements of character response over the course of a novel serial programme. Due to the choice of design, the ability to generalise from these data to other programmes or genre is limited. All results displayed here were most certainly tied to variations in the plot on a weekly basis. Future research should therefore vary exposure time in a systematic fashion in order to show the effects of exposure on attitude polarisation for ambiguous characters. Secondly, the programme had a strong point-of-view perspective from one protagonist. The strong point-of-view for the main protagonist may have heavily weighted enjoyment away from dispositionally interesting interactions towards simple character liking. Future research concerning the role of ambiguous characters should select main characters with variable morality in order to study audience perceptions of these characters directly. Additionally, the group of participants was drawn from a student sample. Although basic cognitive appraisal processes inherent in dramatic appreciation should be fully represented in this sample, a student sample may limit the generalisability of these findings. Finally, the programme chosen did not hold strongly to dispositional tenets. Therefore, in future research alternate programmes with clear-cut endings may be preferred over ones with disappointing conclusions.

6 Conclusion

This study offers insights into the ways characters develop overtime, and the critical factors for promoting audience enjoyment. It appears that ambiguous characters are indeed distinct from good or bad characters, mainly due to the variance in their portrayal

overtime. While they are not critical in dispositionally derived enjoyment, they may provide other functions critical to audience engagement and narrative involvement. As stories featuring morally ambiguous characters become more prevalent, understanding the role these characters play in narrative appeal is critical to understand and predict emotional response to narrative.

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